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ABSTRACT

This study examined cross-cultural differences in European American teachers' explanations for the causes of school problems among African American, European American, and Hispanic American 5- to 11-year-olds. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using an attribution theory framework. For European American children, teachers tended to use situational explanation of problems (57.1%). In comparison, for African American and Hispanic American children, teachers tended to use personal explanation of youth problems (64.8%). There were a wide variety of explanations within these broad categories. The results indicate that teachers tend to blame European American youth problems on other persons and the environment (situational factors), whereas teachers tend to blame African American and Hispanic American youth problems on the individual (dispositional factors). The findings suggest that an increased understanding of the cultural diversity in teachers' perceptions of youth problems is important to discussions about student discipline and their possible applications. Implications for future research directions are discussed. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/JDM)

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A Study of Teachers' Referral to the School Counselor

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Abstract

This study examined cross-cultural differences in European American teachers' explanations for the causes of school problems among African American, European American, and Hispanic American 5 to 11-year olds. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using an attribution theory framework. For European American children, teachers tended to use situational explanation of problems (57.1 %). In comparison, for African American and Hispanic American children, teachers tended to use personal explanation of youth problems (64.8%). There were a wide variety of explanations within these broad categories. The most frequently occurring teacher explanations for European American youth problems were statements such as "child has problems at home" (52.5%). For African American and Hispanic American youth problems, the most frequently occurring teacher explanations were statements such as "child has become disrespectful, hostile and aggressive and is not taking responsibility" (76.7%), and "child is unmanageable" (66.7%). The results indicate that teachers tend to blame European American youth problems on other persons and the environment (situational factors), whereas teachers tend to blame African American and Hispanic American youth problems on the individual (dispositional factors). The findings suggest that an increased understanding of the cultural diversity in teachers' perceptions of youth problems is important to discussions about student discipline and their possible applications. Implications for future research directions are discussed.

A Study of Teachers' Perceptions of Youth Problems

Children experience many problems between the ages of 5 to 11 some that go unrecognized by teachers and parents. Teachers and parents may, however, identify specific problems especially if these problems interfere with the child's academic success. Children may then be referred to the school counselor, school psychologist, or community mental health center. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about youth problems are related to their beliefs about social control. These beliefs may produce and reproduce some of the social inequalities in schools.

Social Transformation Theories

Social transformation theories (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998) have attracted the attention of many contemporary scholars in education. Social transformation theories promote classroom pedagogies intended to liberate people of color, the poor, women, and other historically subordinated groups. Social transformation theories contend that society is structured in ways that produce and reproduce inequalities. They reject the ideal that educational institutions represent the interests of all people, they believe that schools are dominated by privileged groups, especially White middle-class European American males (Hemmings, 2000). School policies, procedures, and interactions are all governed by hidden assumptions about power relationships (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1984). Understanding these hidden assumptions that school policies and procedures are based on can help transform multicultural school societies hopefully bringing about more equitable experiences for students.

School policies dealing with student problems, such as discipline, referral to outside agencies, and suspension are influenced by lay theories about youth problems.

Lay theories for youth problems, specifically, youth crimes have been widely researched in social psychology literature (Brown & Lalljee, 198; Hollin & Howells, 1987; Pfeffer, Cole, & Dada, 1996). Hollin and Howells (1987) emphasized differences between various sectors of the population and lay theories about juvenile crime. Other researchers have found differences according to sex (Banks, Maloney, & Willcrock, 1975; Furnham & Henderson, 1983; Reuterman, 1978), age (Reuterman, 1978) political affiliation (Furnham & Henderson, 1983), and professional experience (Stalans & Lurigio, 1990). Brown and Lalljee (1981) found that adolescents tended to explain crimes in terms of personal causes rather than situational causes. Pfeffer, Cole, and Dada (1996) explored cultural differences in British and Nigerian adolescents' explanations for youth crime. They found that British adolescents tended to use internal attributions and Nigerian adolescents tended to use external attributions. A substantial body of literature exists about how explanations may vary according to various demographic variables.

Few studies, however, have investigated how explanations for problems vary according to the demographics of the offender. Hollin and Howells (1987) conducted the first study that investigated whether explanations for violent crimes differed according to the perceived race of the offender. Results indicated a lack of any difference in explanations for crimes according to the race of offender. Hollin and Howells concluded that limitations in their study design might have prevented significant findings.

Recently, however, Zimmerman, Khoury, Vega, Gil & Warheit (1995) found variations in explanations for youth problems according to student racial differences. Zimmerman, Khoury, Vega, Gil & Warheit (1995) studied how teacher ratings of student behavior problems varied according to teacher-student racial/ethnic differences. They

found that African American students rated by Hispanic and non-Hispanic white teachers had significantly higher mean total behavior problems than African American students rated by African American teachers.

Understanding educators' perceptions of student behavior problems according to racial differences is extremely important because teachers' explanations about youth problems are also related to their beliefs about what type of intervention students need: for example, the approportioning of funds for community vs. institutional approaches to managing students. Understanding teachers' perceptions of youth problems can lead to understanding and transforming suppressive educational practices that misrepresent the experiences of subordinated people.

Attribution Theory

Previous research (Brown & Lalljee, 1981) investigating lay theories have used an attribution theory framework. Attribution theory emphasizes explanations people make for the causes of events. A basic distinction within attribution theory is between internal and external causes of behavior. Social psychologists (Pfeffer, Cole, & Dada, 1996; Smith & Bond, 1994) have consistently reported that in western cultures over-emphasis is placed on internal attributions whereas in non-western cultures there is evidence that more emphasis is placed on external attributions (Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984). This difference is thought to be due to a focus on the individual and personal responsibility in western societies and the family and collective responsibility in non-western societies (Pfeffer, Cole, & Dada, 1996).

In a comprehensive study of 50 countries, Hofstede (1980) distinguished national cultures based on the dimension of individualism-collectivism. Individualism-

collectivism has to do with whether one's identity is defined by personal choices or achievements (individualism) or by the character of the collective groups to which one is more or less permanently attached (collectivism). Hofstede rank ordered scores of 50 countries on the individualism-collectivism dimension. European and North American countries emerged as high on individualism, whereas Latin American and Asian countries emerged as low on individualism. Not surprisingly the central concept in the social representation of the individual in western countries has been that individuals are accountable for their own actions (Smith & Bond, 1994). For example studies by Feagin (1972) and Townsend (1979) found that North American countries more often explained poverty in individualistic terms that in situational terms. On the other hand researchers in India (Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, & Tripathi, 1982) found that participants offered situational explanations more often to explain the problems such as poverty.

Relatively little research attention has been given to teachers explanations of youth problems. The aims of this study were to examine teachers' perceptions of African American, Hispanic American, and European American youth problems. An increased understanding of the cultural diversity in teachers' explanations of youth problems is an important addition to the existing body of knowledge and provides an interesting focus to the theoretical debate about cultural diversity. In accordance with previous literature on cultural differences in attributions we hypothesized that teachers explanations of European American youth problems would reflect internal attributions and teachers explanations of African American and Hispanic American youth problems would reflect external attributions.

Method

Subjects

Subjects included 3 European American school administrators 64 European American teachers, 6 European American paraprofessionals employed in an urban southeastern United States elementary school. Enrollment at the school over the course of the study ranged from 703 to 430 students, with between 72 to 55 staff members. There are four self-contained special education classes. The school is culturally diverse with 38% African American, 33% Hispanic/Latino American, 20% European American, and 9% other (Bosnian, Asian, Bi-racial) students during the last year of the study. The socioeconomic status of the student population is low, as defined by the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch (92%). Most students live in one of the two large apartment complexes within a mile of the school. The building itself was built in 1952 and was renovated 10 years ago. The parking lot, playgrounds, and entranceway seem to lack regular maintenance.

An examination of end of the year reports for the last 5 years indicates that, on average, the counselor made referrals to Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) on 20% of the students for suspected child abuse. Fifteen percent of the students each year are referred for crisis intervention to the Prevention/Intervention Center for suicidal ideations or attempts, severe depression, or other crises. Forty percent of the students are referred to the school social worker for issues involving truancy, medical needs, housing assistance, economic assistance and other related issues.

Measures

One hundred and eighty nine teachers', paraprofessionals', and administrators' responses on a school counseling referral form (see Appendix 1) to an opened ended question (Please describe the nature of the problem) were collected over a five year period. Responses included descriptions of 105 male youth problems (55.6%) and 84 female youth problems (44.4%). There were 84 teacher explanations of European American youth problems (44.4%), 92 teacher explanations of African American youth problems (48.7%) and 13 teacher explanations of Hispanic American youth problems (6.9 %). Forty (21.2%) explanations represented kindergarten youth problems, 30 (15.9%) explanations represented first grade youth problems, 27 (14.3%) explanations represented second grade youth problems, 42 (22.2%) explanations represented third grade youth problems, 27 (14.3%) explanations represented fourth grade youth problems, and 23 (12.2%) represented fifth grade youth problems. Teacher explanations for youth problems were grouped retaining the respondents' own terms of expressions. These groups were then analyzed using a modification of the attribution theory approach used by Brown and Lalljee (1981) and adapted by Pfeffer, Cole and Dada (1996). Analysis incorporated two broad categories of explanation, situational explanations and personal explanations. Situational explanations were into two sub-categories: (1) other persons (explanations given in terms of other persons influencing action); or (2) environmental causes (explanations given in terms of long-term features of the environment). Personal explanations were grouped into three sub categories: (1) temporary (explanations given in terms of temporary characteristics or states); (2) stable (explanations given referring to

relatively stable characteristics); or (3) specific goals (explanations given referring to goals which are achieved by committing offences). Two research assistants, blindly and separately, coded responses into categories. Percent agreement was 92.4%. Any discrepancies were resolved by discussion until agreement was reached.

Results

The results were analyzed as follows. A between-group analysis to examine the effects of culture was carried out comparing the teachers' explanations for the European American, African American, and Hispanic American youth problems. Within-group analyses were carried out on the explanations for the European American, African American, and Hispanic American youth problems.

Cross-cultural comparisons

Explanations given for the European American, African American, and Hispanic American youth problems differed significantly when comparing personal and situational categories. Due to low expected frequencies, the results from the teachers' explanations for African American and Hispanic American youth problems were combined within the broad category of non-European American youth problems. More situational explanations than personal explanations were given for European American youth problems ($\chi^2 = 1, 9.05, p < .001$) than for non-European American youth problems (see Table 1).

Within the broad category of situational explanations a significant difference was found between teachers' explanations of European American and non-European American youth problems ($\chi^2 = 1, 3.88, p < .05$). The situational explanation "other person" was the most frequently occurring response type for European American youth

problems (61.8%) while the situational explanation "environmental causes" was the most frequently occurring response type for non-European American youth problems (64.7%).

Within the broad category of personal explanations no significant difference was found between teachers' explanations of European American and non-European American youth problems ($\chi^2 = 1, 1.465, p > .05$). The personal explanation "personal: temporary" was the most frequently occurring teacher response for both European American (52.8%) and non-European American youth problems (63.2%).

European American Results

As can be seen from Table 1, more situational explanations (57.1%) than personal explanations (42.9%) were given for European American youth problems. Within-group analyses revealed that significantly more personal explanations were given by teachers for European American male problems than for females ($\chi^2 = 1, 4.86, p < .05$). Teachers gave situational explanations most often for European American female problems (69%) while teachers gave personal explanations for European American male problems (54.8%).

The most frequently occurring teacher explanations within each category were examined (see Table 2). For the situational explanations "other persons" subcategory, the most frequently occurring teacher explanation for both male and female European American children were statements such as "child has problems at home (52.5%) followed by incidences of child abuse (21.4%), and domestic abuse (14.3%). For the sub-category "environmental causes", the most frequently occurring response was financial problems (100%) such as "family needs food assistance", or "family is homeless". The most frequently occurring personal explanation in the "personal temporary" sub-category

for male European American youth was temporary misbehavior such as aggression, defiance, or fighting (87.5%). For European American females the most common teacher explanations in the "personal temporary" category were adjustment problems (50%), such as "child is having trouble adjusting to new school" followed by temporary misbehavior such as aggression, defiance, or fighting (30%). In the sub-category "personal stable" teacher explanations were more common for European American males (11) than for European Americans females (2). Teachers' explanations in this category included responses such as "He is a bad boy," "He is a behavior problem," and "He is unmanageable." Only four of the teacher explanations for the European American youth problems were categorized as "personal goal specific." The most common response was that the child was attempting to gain attention by participating in the problem behavior (75%).

Non-European American Results

As can be seen from Table 1, more teachers gave more personal (64.8%) than situational explanations (35.2%) for non-European American youth problems. Within-group analysis revealed that significantly more personal explanations were given by teachers for non-European American male problems than for non-European American female problems ($\chi^2 = 1, 4.70, p < .05$). Teachers gave situational explanations were most often for non-European American female youth problems (54.1%) while teachers gave personal explanations for non-European American male problems (67.6%).

The most frequently occurring teacher explanations for non-European American youth problems within each category were examined (see Table 2). For the situational subcategory "other persons" the most frequently occurring teacher explanation for males

was family problems (90%). For non-European American females the most frequently occurring teacher explanation in the situational subcategory "other persons" was child abuse (68.7%) followed by family problems (31.3%). For the situational explanation sub-category "environmental causes", the most frequently occurring response was concerns about the child's living situation (71.4%) for non-European American males and concerns about the child having to take care of siblings (75%) for non-European American females.

The most frequently occurring personal explanation in the "personal temporary" sub-category for non-European American males and females temporary misbehavior were statements such as "child has become disrespectful, hostile and aggressive and is not taking responsibility" (76.7%). In the sub-category "personal stable" teacher explanations were more common for non-European American males (16) than for non-European American females (5). Teachers' explanations in this category included responses such as "child is unmanageable" (66.7%). Only four of the teacher explanations for the non-European American youth problems were categorized as "personal goal specific." The most common explanation for non-European American female problems was that the child was attempting to take care of others, such as, "child stole greeting card to give to me" and "child stole money from father to give to brother for lunch money."

Discussion

The results indicate a surprisingly clear distinction between the explanations given by teachers concerning European American and non-European American youth problems in terms of personal and situational categories. The European American

teachers in this study tended to use situational explanations for European American youth problems, especially in terms of family influences such as divorce and economic influences such as poverty implying that the perpetrators of the problems are not personally responsible for their actions. Teachers tended to use personal explanations for non-European American youth problems, in terms of temporary characteristics such as aggression, hostility, or defiance and in terms of stable personality characteristics such as long term behavior problems implying that the perpetrators of the problems are personally responsible for their actions.

These results support Jones and Nisbett (1972) study of "actor-observer difference". Jones and Nisbett claim that there is a higher tendency for explanations of our own behavior (in western societies) to be in terms of situational causes and a higher tendency for explanations of other people's behavior to be in terms of internal causes. The European American teachers involved in this study may have more easily identified with the European American youth thereby exhibiting a higher tendency to explain European American youth problems in situational terms. While teachers who had difficulty identifying with non-European American children, tended to explain their behavior in terms of internal or personal causes.

The results from this study may also be described in terms of the correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). The correspondence bias is the tendency to explain a person's behavior in terms of the person's unique disposition even when the behavior can be explained by the situations in which it occurs. Gilbert and Malone claim that "people make inferences about the dispositions of others even when situational forces explain the

behavior quite nicely" (p. 22). Dispositional inferences may contribute to "social blindness" as described by Ichheirser (1949):

> We all have in everyday life the tendency to interpret and evaluate the behavior of other people in terms of specific personality characteristics rather than in terms of specific social situations in which those people are placed. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance of this type of social blindness in the crisis of our age. Many things which happened between the two world wars would not have happened if social blindness had not prevented the privileged from understanding the predicament of those who were living in an invisible jail. (p. 47)

Teachers' explanations for African American and Hispanic American youth problems characterize this phenomenon of social blindness and correspondence bias. European American teachers tended to use dispositional explanations for African American and Hispanic American youth problems. Gilbert and Malone claim that correspondence bias occurs from a lack of awareness or unrealistic expectations. Therefore, teachers' tendency to use dispositional explanations for minority students' problems may be caused from the teachers' lack of awareness of the minority students' social situations.

Research (Bersheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1979; Miller, Norman & Wright, 1978) has also found that when an individual's need for control is piqued there is a tendency toward dispositional inferences. Dispositional explanations for African American and Hispanic American youth problems may help teachers maintain a sense of control in the classroom. Most notable would be that the individual child is thereby deemed responsible for his or her own behavior, which gets the teacher, the school, and society off the hook in terms of being responsible to try to help the child. If schools

embrace the idea that youth problems are essentially the products of the sociopolitical context in which they occur, then changes would occur in school policies such as discipline. Transforming school policies to reflect that youth problems are the products of the sociopolitical context would reflect the ideas of social transformation theorists who have argued that schools are structured in ways that produce and reproduce social inequalities. This study has shown how schools fail non-European American children. European American teachers identify with European American children, they understand the child's social environment and therefore offer explanations for European American youth problems in terms of situational causes. On the other hand, teachers who lack an awareness of what it is like to be an African American or Hispanic American child offer explanations for youth problems in terms of personal characteristics. Whether this is due to lack of awareness or an attempt to maintain control, teachers appear to be saying that African American and Hispanic American children are responsible for their own actions, while European American children are not responsible for their own actions.

Fine (1987) defines the privatizing of public and political issues as psychologizing. She discusses how schools attempt to psychologize public and political issues of minority students similar to how teachers in this study explained non-European American youth problems in personal terms. In a year-long ethnography of a high school in Manhattan, she found that white administrators and teachers were more comfortable referring low-income African American and Hispanic students to the school psychologist or counselor than they were trying to have the hard conversations in their classrooms about poverty, race, domestic violence, drug abuse, environmental hazards, gentrification and unemployment. Fine found that the psychologizing of public and political issues

served to reinforce the alienation of students' lives from their educational experiences. School reforms must bring be involved in halting the psychologizing of social and political problems in schools.

School reforms must also include policies to address social inequalities. These policies would welcome social and political reform efforts that would attempt to halt the psychologizing of non-European American youth problems. Community efforts aimed at reducing the number of children living in poverty, the number of teenage pregnancies, and the number of incidences of domestic violence would do more to equalize students' experiences in schools. At the local school level, teachers need to have a cultural awareness and understanding of their students' lived experiences. Field trips, community activism, and community service should be a required component of teachers' job descriptions. Reforms must not only take place at the school level. Public policy, political agendas, and religious movements must also be in line with reform efforts that cry out that youth problems are the reflection of our social and political climate.

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Table 1

Frequency of Teachers' Explanations for European American and African American and Hispanic Youth Problems (Percentages in Parentheses)

Group	Situational explanations			Personal Explanations				Total (100%)
	Other persons	Environmental causes	Total	Temporary	Stable	Specific Goals	Total	
European American	42 (50%)	6 (7.1%)	48	19 (22.6%)	13 (15.5%)	4 (4.8%)	36	84
African American	24 (26.1%)	11 (12%)	35	39 (42.4%)	15 (16.3%)	3 (3.3%)	57	92
Hispanic	2 (15.4%)	-	2	4 (30.8%)	6 (46.2%)	1 (7.7%)	11	13

Table 2

Most Frequently Occurring Teacher Explanations in Each Category for European American and Non-European American Youth Problems

Group	Situational explanations		Personal Explanations		
	Other persons	Environmental causes	Temporary	Stable	Specific goals
Male European American	Family problems	Financial problems	Aggressive, defiant,	Behavior problem: long term	Attention
Female European American	Family problems	Financial problems	Adjustment	Behavior problem: Long term	Attention
Male non-European American	Family problems	Living situation	Disrespectful, hostile, aggressive	Behavior problem: long term	Attention
Female non-European American	Child Abuse	Taking care of siblings	Disrespectful, hostile, aggressive	Behavior problem: long term	To take care of others

APPENDIX

Referral to the School Counselor

Student _____ Sex _____ Race _____ Birthdate _____

Referring Person _____ Homeroom Teacher _____ Grade ____

Father _____ Business Phone _____

Mother _____ _____ Business Phone _____

Home Address _____ Home Phone _____

1. Describe the nature of the problem:

_____

_____

_____

2. Describe the courses of action that have been taken to help correct the problem:

_____

_____

_____

3. Have the student's parents been involved? Yes ____ No ____

4. Describe the student's relationship with his/her family:

_____

_____

_____

5. Describe the student's relationship with his/her peers:

_____

_____

_____

6. Please relate any additional information or comments you feel would be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the student and his/her problem:

_____

_____

_____

7. Does the student receive any special education services? Yes ____ No ____ If yes, please identify the program and the times that the student participates.